

SAF V Survey Report

Adjustment of Army Children to Deployment Separations

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Background

Army families, including their children, are experiencing significantly high rates of deployment. While adults in the family, including the Soldier and spouse, may anticipate the challenges that can arise from periods of separation due to military operations, the consequences for children are less well known. Children also respond to the challenges of deployments, particularly to theaters of war operations, in ways that may be quite different from their parents. Still, their separation experiences have potential impacts on the adjustments of Soldiers and members of their families. To assist in these adjustments, the Army provides a supportive environment, as well as services, that is designed to promote positive adjustments and strengthen child well-being during the period of separation. This climate of support helps meet the objective of the Army Well-Being Strategic Plan that individuals in the Army attain a positive sense of well-being. It is recognized that these periods of separation are not only potentially stressful for families but that this stress can impact the readiness of the Soldier and his/her unit. Thus, it is in the best interests of the Army to promote positive

deployment and separation adjustments among the children of deployed Soldiers.

Key Actions

- ❖ Improve Army agency and leadership support for families with children.
- ❖ Increase parent involvement in and support for child and youth services.
- ❖ Strengthen parent and child support activities prior to and during the deployment.
- ❖ Work with schools to prepare teachers and counselors for deployment related issues.
- ❖ Strengthen marriage and parent-child relationships before deployments.
- ❖ Prepare parents to respond to children's deployment issues.

Key Findings

- ❖ About half of Army children cope well with deployments.
- ❖ Over one-third (37%) of children seriously worry about what could happen to their deployed parent.
- ❖ Depression and school problems occur in about one in five children.
- ❖ Adjustments to being in a temporary one parent family are difficult for younger children and parents.
- ❖ The majority of parents do not consider the Army a good place to raise children.
- ❖ About half of parents are satisfied with child and youth programs.
- ❖ Use of Army child and youth programs helps children adjust to deployments.
- ❖ Parent resilience is best predictor of children's coping with deployment.

The objective of this report is to provide an analysis of how well the dependent children of Army Soldiers are adjusting to deployment and separation demands, and how well the assistance provided to these children is supporting these adjustments. The data for this analysis, however, come from the perspective of the civilian spouse, most often the mother, who manages the family during the period of separation. Child adjustment to the separation is examined from the perspective of how well their Army family is able to acquire the relational and organizational assets they need to help them adapt to the stresses of separations.

Data Source

The U.S. Army Community and Family Support Center (CFSC), in conjunction with the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI), has conducted Surveys of Army Families (SAFs) every 4 years or so to examine areas important to Army families. The most recent survey (SAF V) was conducted between September 2004 and January 2005. A previous survey (SAF IV) was conducted in April through July 2001. This survey is one way to assess the effectiveness of the Army's Well-being Initiative.

Key questions related to deployment and separation experience and adjustment of children were included on the 2004-2005 SAF. The data for this analysis were collected from two groups of spouses, each of whom received different but similar survey questionnaires: (1) spouses whose member was currently deployed to a theater of war operations and (2) spouses whose member had been deployed to a theater of war operations but had returned in the past 12 months. Each of these surveys included questions on the adjustment of children to the deployment separation. Since these surveys are conducted from a sample of Army spouses, any interpretation of the findings should take into account the sampling error (SEs). For this report the following SEs apply: overall sample = +/- 1%; officer spouses = +/- 2%; enlisted spouses = +/- 2%.

Key Findings

The findings in this analysis are provided in three sections: (1) Children Experiencing Deployment of a Parent; (2) Children's Deployment Adjustments and (3) Support for Children's Deployment Adjustment

Children Experiencing Deployment of a Parent

In the 36 months prior to the current SAF V, 97% of Army spouses experienced a duty-related separation from their Soldier spouse. Of these families, about one-third (36%) had experienced a current or recent deployment, including 17% in which the Soldier was then deployed and 19% with a Soldier who had returned in the past 12 months (see Table 1). The following are key findings from this analysis:

- ★ OCONUS families had the highest rates of current deployment (27%)
- ★ Families of enlisted report higher rates of current (19%) and recent (20%) deployment compared to officers (13% and 13%)
- ★ The deployment experience rates are highest among enlisted and officer families in the junior grades

Table 1. Percent of Army Families With Current or Recent Deployment Experience		
	Now Deployed	Deployed, Returned
Officer	13	13
O1-O3	17	19
O4-O6	9	7
Enlisted	19	20
E1-E4	21	21
E5-E6	20	23
E7-E9	13	14
Warrant Officer	16	18
CONUS	15	20
OCONUS	27	11
Overall	17	19

Among those with either a current or recent deployment, the majority had children aged 11 years or younger (see Table 2). The young ages of children from deployed parents is largely a reflection of the young ages of Army families and the higher deployment rates of junior grade enlisted and officer personnel. Parents often have more than one child and these children may

Table 2. Percent of Families with At Least One Child By Deployment Status

Ages	Overall	Deployed	Deployed, Returned
0-2 yrs.	43	44	41
3-5 yrs.	39	38	41
6-10 yrs.	41	40	42
11-12 yrs.	16	16	16
13-15 yrs.	16	16	17
16-19 yrs.	10	10	11
19 or older	4	4	4

be in different age groups but the highest percentage of deployed Soldiers (43%) have children 2 years of age and younger. Other findings include:

- ★ There are no significant differences in the ages of the children among the Soldiers who are currently deployed and those who have recently returned from deployment
- ★ Deployed Soldiers are least likely to have adolescent children

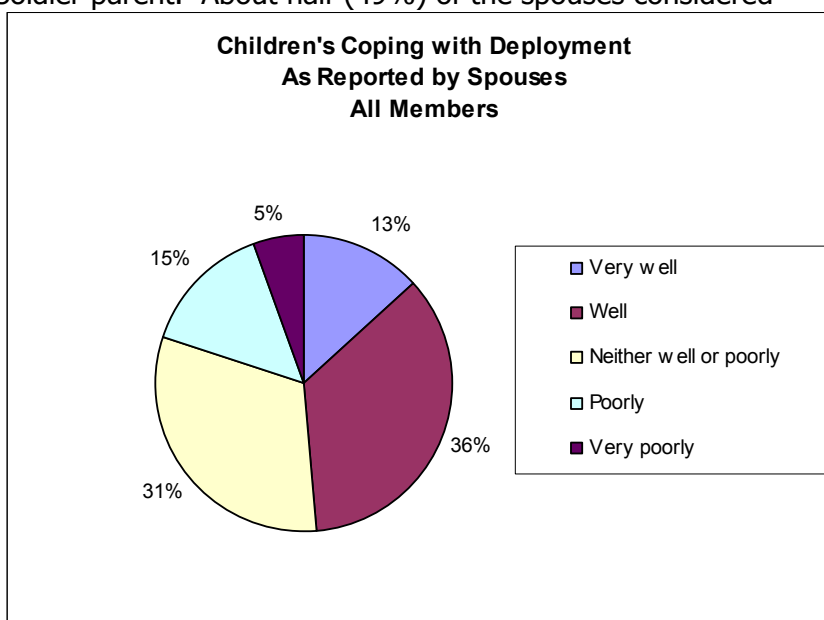
Children's Deployment Adjustments

Spouses were asked to rate the level of coping that their oldest child experienced during the period of the deployment of their Soldier parent. About half (49%) of the spouses considered their child to have coped either very well or well (see Figure 1). One in five children (20%), in contrast, was considered to have had either a poor or very poor adjustment to the separation. For the remaining children (31%), the parents could not rate their children's response as either coping well or poorly.

When the data on child coping is examined by the age of the child, it is apparent that there are differences in coping response among children at different ages (see Table 3).

Overall, older adolescents appear to cope much better with the separation than children at younger ages. Other relevant findings include:

- ★ Parents believe the youngest children cope the most poorly with the deployment separation, especially preschoolers under 6 years of age
- ★ The oldest adolescents are perceived to cope the best with deployments



- ★ But, during the deployments, children are perceived to be coping better than after the deployment is over and parents have a chance to reflect on their children's experience. At every age, parents with a Soldier who has returned from deployment rate their children's coping less well than those currently experiencing deployment. This may indicate that parents become more aware of the challenges their children are experiencing after the Soldier parent has returned.
- ★ The greatest differences in perceived coping among the currently deployed and recently deployed occur among parents of adolescents, especially those with teens between 13 to 15 years of age.

Table 3. Oldest Child Coping Well During Deployment

	% Coping Well	
	Deployed	Deployed, Returned
2 yrs or younger	47	45
3-5 yrs old	46	37
6-10 yrs old	51	42
11-12 yrs old	58	48
13-15 yrs old	63	49
16-18 yrs old	65	55
19 yrs or older	69	64
Overall	53	45

The survey allowed parents to report on their oldest child's reactions to the separation from their Soldier parent along a variety of potential problem dimensions (see Table 4). These are then examined according the age of the oldest child at the time of the survey.

The most common problems identified include "fear of what could happen to the parent" (37%) and "sadness" (35%). Both of these problems are most widespread for children in the elementary and middle school ages (6-12 years of age), with over half (56%) of 6-10 year olds having significant worries about the parent who is deployed. Other findings include:

Table 4. Problem with Oldest Child's Reaction to Deployment

	% Reporting Moderate to Very Serious Problems						
	> 2 yrs.	3-5 yrs.	6-10 yrs.	11-12 yrs.	13-15 yrs.	16-18 yrs.	Overall
Fear of what could happen to parent	4	27	56	54	47	40	37
Sadness	11	40	48	39	34	27	35
Adjusting to one parent	14	38	32	26	25	22	27
Lack of concentration	4	22	35	30	29	24	24
Aggressive behavior	10	30	26	21	23	20	22
Distress over media coverage of war	1	8	27	29	27	24	18
Depression	4	15	22	20	23	19	17
Distress over rumors of war	0	6	26	28	27	24	17
Academic trouble at school	0	5	18	20	28	23	14
Behavioral trouble at school	1	8	15	13	15	13	11

- ★ High levels of children's sadness are common across all age groups
- ★ Preschool and younger children are reported to have more problems adjusting to having only one parent at home and aggressive behavior.
- ★ Aggressive behavior is especially problematic for younger children (3-10 years of age) but continues to be a problem for one in five adolescents
- ★ Media coverage and war rumors trouble over one in four children of school age
- ★ Depression is reported for about one in four children of school age
- ★ Academic troubles occur for about one in five children of school age
- ★ Behavior troubles at school occur for about one in seven children of school age

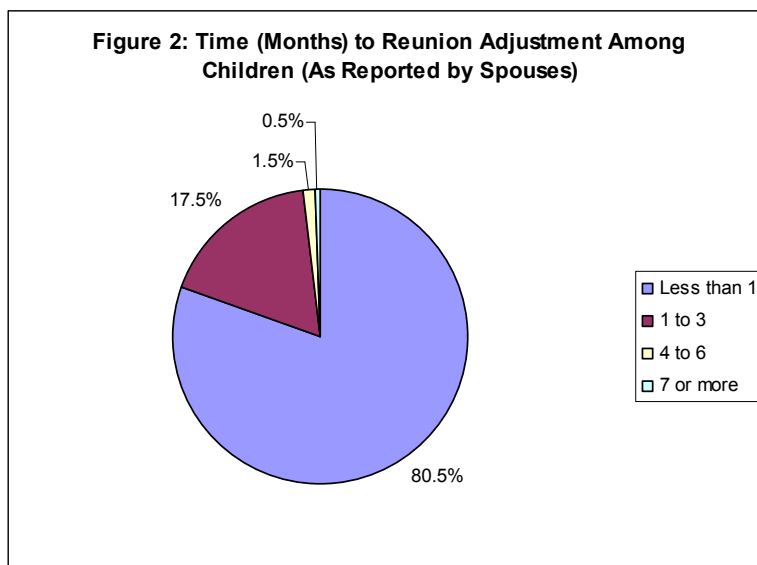
Given these problems experienced by children, it is not surprising that parents report some challenges in managing their children during the deployment (see Table 5). Given the absence of the Soldier parent and the young ages of many of the children, arranging child care is considered the most difficult challenge. Only about half of spouses (46% of deployed and 53% of deployed and returned) indicated that they managed child care well. Other findings include:

- ★ Managing the health of children is rated as the least difficult challenge.
- ★ Three in four parents feel they coped well with taking care of their children and making sure they did their homework
- ★ Two-thirds of parents feel they are able to handle discipline and control issues well during the deployment.

Table 5. Managing Children Well During Deployment		
	% Managing Well	
	Deployed	Deployed, Returned
Health of children	85	88
Taking care of children at home	76	79
Ensuring children do schoolwork	71	74
Disciplining/handling children	63	67
Arranging child care	46	53

It should be noted that parents currently experiencing deployment rate their coping abilities less well than those whose Soldier spouse has returned and are looking back on their experiences. This is in contrast to the above ratings of how well their children coped. These data suggest that parents may look back more positively on themselves but less positively on their children's coping abilities.

When asked about the time it took for children to adjust well after the deployment and their return of the Soldier parent, the spouses reported that four out of five of their children (80.5%) required less than one month. Another one in six children (17.5%) took one to three months and 2% took four or more months (see Figure 2). Thus, the challenges experienced during the deployment were rated as significant but the reunion led to readjustments for children rather quickly, according to the spouses surveyed.



Support for Children's Deployment Adjustments

The environment for child and family adjustment to Soldier deployment is established by the strengths within the family as well as the community and services that are offered to the child and family. A family has greater capability to adapt to the challenges of deployment when it sustains sources of internal resilience and engages the broader community in providing assistance when needed. One aspect of this community environment is a set of beliefs that the Army community is a good place to raise children.

When asked if they considered the Army community as a good place to raise children, fewer than half of spouses agreed (see Table 6). The belief that this is true is more common among parents with children 11 years of age or younger (48%) than with older adolescents (34%). Other key findings in this analysis include:

- ★ Spouses of officers are much more likely to see the Army community positively (62% with older children and 37% with younger children) than enlisted spouses (46% and 33%).
- ★ There are no differences between CONUS and OCONUS spouses in their perceptions of the Army community as a positive environment for children.
- ★ The longer the spouse is in the service, the more likely they see the Army community as having a positive influence on their children.
- ★ When beliefs about the Army as a good place for younger children are linked to the parent's desires for the Soldier spouse to remain in the Army (not on the Table), it was found that 86% of the parents who think that the Army is good for younger children want their spouse to stay in the Army. Among parents who think the Army is not good for these children, 51% want them to stay in.

Table 6. Percent Reporting Army Community as a Good Place to Raise Children

	Children under 11 yrs. Old	Children 11-19 yrs. Old
Officer	62	37
O1-O3	56	31
O4-O6	69	43
Enlisted	46	33
E1-E4	42	31
E5-E6	45	32
E7-E9	53	40
Warrant Officer	52	35
CONUS	48	34
OCONUS	48	33
Female	48	34
Male	49	32
Overall	48	34

The Army provides a range of high quality programs and services for Army children and families. These range from quality child care to after school and youth programs. The parents of deployed Soldiers were asked to indicate how satisfied they are with the programs that are available for their children (see Table 7). Overall, about half (54%) of the parents indicate that they are satisfied with these programs but one in five (21%) are clearly not satisfied. The remaining parents have mixed feelings. The data indicate:

- ★ Spouses of officers are much more likely to be satisfied with Army child/youth programs (65%) than enlisted spouses (51%).
- ★ Program satisfaction ratings are slightly higher in CONUS (55%) than OCONUS (51%).
- ★ Ratings of child and youth program dissatisfaction do not differ among those from different ranks but program satisfaction tends to be higher among those in the higher pay grades.

Table 7. Parent Satisfaction with Programs for Children/Youth

	% Not Satisfied	% Satisfied
Officer	15	65
O1-O3	15	63
O4-O6	15	66
Enlisted	23	51
E1-E4	23	46
E5-E6	24	52
E7-E9	22	54
Warrant Officer	20	59
CONUS	20	55
OCONUS	26	51
Female	22	54
Male	19	62
Overall	21	54

Another way of assessing the factors that encourage positive deployment coping on the part of children is to examine organizational and family assets that can potentially influence the resilience of children and help them cope with extended periods of separation. These assets are attributes of the family or the Army environment that can provide resources during times of stress and challenge. Assets that children can rely on consist of strengths within the family that help to buffer the child's experience with the deployment or give the child confidence in their parents' support. Other assets can include Army support services or the parent's trust that the Army is a

trusted institution that will support them during this deployment. The approach used here assumes that families who take advantage of assets that are available will be better able to cope successfully and sustain their resilience. This analysis of assets can also help Army leaders better develop strategies for improving separation adjustments by targeting resources toward those assets that return the greatest benefit to Army families.

The analysis of assets and deployment coping among children who are experiencing, or have recently experienced, a deployment is provided on Table 8. Comparisons are made between those who indicated their children were coping well or very well with their current or recent deployment and those who were coping poorly or very poorly. The data clearly indicate that the children who have these assets are the most likely to adjust well to a duty-related separation, in this case a deployment to a theater of war operations. The difference score column offers a quick summary of how much difference in adjustment can be attributed to each of the assets listed in the table. The data on the table should be interpreted as follows: Among children who coped well with the deployment, 52% of their parents reported they used Army child and youth programs; among those who coped poorly with the deployment, 40% used Army child and youth programs.

Table 8. Presence of Army and Family Assets and Oldest Child's Coping with Deployment			
	% Reporting Asset		
	Coped Well	Coped Poorly	Difference (Well-Poorly)
Army Assets			
Parent believes Army good place to raise children	58	41	16
Parent satisfied with respect Army shows families	38	23	15
Used Army child or youth programs	52	40	12
Participated in Army recreation facilities	50	43	6
Army helped prepare children for return	79	75	4
Participated as family in MWR programs	43	40	3
Family Assets			
Parent coped well with deployment	72	36	36
Parent handled children well in deployment	79	55	23
Family adjusts well to Army demands	79	54	25
Parent satisfied with their marriage	83	74	9
Family went to church/synagogue	62	59	3
Parent served on active duty	16	14	2

The findings from this analysis of assets and children's deployment adjustment indicate:

- ★ All of the Army and family support assets are positively linked to children's deployment adjustments, although some factors are much more important than others.
- ★ The parents' perceptions that their children coped well with deployment are strongly tied to the belief that they as parents are coping well with the deployment. Parents who coped well are twice as likely (72% vs. 36%) as those who coped poorly to believe that their children coped well.
- ★ Another significant family adjustment factor for children is the parent belief that the family adjusts well to Army demands. Similarly, if the parent believes that the Army is a supportive environment for families and children, the child is much more likely to be perceived as coping well with the deployment.
- ★ Participation in Army child and youth programs is a significant predictor of children's coping with deployment (12% difference in coping) but participating in MWR or other Army recreation programs or involvement in a faith community had only marginal positive effects on coping.
- ★ Army programs designed to prepare children for reunion are widely used (78%) but have small effects on deployment coping (4% difference between coping well and poorly).

- ★ The strength of the parent's marriage also contributed significantly to childhood coping, perhaps as a reflection of the stability and communication in the family of the child.
- ★ The parent's own previous military background had minimal effects on children's coping with the deployment of their Soldier parent

The findings in this report indicate that Army spouses with a deployed Soldier and children at home consider deployment to be a significant challenge to their children and themselves. Only about half of children are rated as having a successful deployment coping experience and the reactions of children range from common fears about losing their parent to depression, school problems and making adjustments to the demands of living at home with a temporary single parent. The families and children who adjust best are those in which the parent at home is adaptable, resilient and coping successfully with the extended separation of their Soldier parent. The Army – for these families – is also viewed as respecting families and offering good child and youth services. Engaging the children in appropriate services is quite helpful to children's adjustment, although fewer than half of children among deployed Soldiers are participating in child and youth support programs.

Clearly, much more can be done to support families with children during deployments. Children are important to Army parents and experiences with poor childhood coping or negative outcomes in personal and school behavior are likely to add significant stress to the deployed Soldier and the parent at home. Some of these stresses and challenges become even more evident after the deployment is over and the family is rebuilding its relationships. The Army can benefit from anticipating the issues families will face and strengthening Army support and family well-being assets. Doing so can pay significant dividends in family deployment adjustments as well as support of the Soldier and for the readiness of the Army to accomplish its missions.